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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the use of a writing-prompt software program, "The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center," by two reluctant writers (two third-grade students attending a school in a suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) and compared their work with their pencil and paper writing. Given that computers are effective tools for supporting children's writing, and given the claims of software companies that writing-prompt programs help reluctant writers, the following question was asked: What happens when a reluctant writer uses writing-prompt software? The data reported were obtained from questionnaires, interviews, observations, and a collection of paper and pencil stories and computer work. Results indicated that writing-prompt software enabled two reluctant writers to think differently about their writing. They wrote more using the computer and were willing to compose stories on the computer. In addition, they took these experiences of writing with the computer and applied this knowledge to their everyday writing. Implications for teaching practices and future research are discussed. (Contains 30 references.) (Author/RS)

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ED 440 381

Reluctant Writers & Writing-prompt Software

Masters Thesis

Linda Yackanicz
Chestnut Hill College

CS 217 061

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This study investigated the use of a writing-prompt software program, The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center, by two reluctant writers and compared their work with their pencil and paper writing. Given that computers are effective tools for supporting children's writing, and given the claims of software companies that writing-prompt programs help reluctant writers, the following question was asked: What happens when a reluctant writer uses writing-prompt software? The data reported were obtained from questionnaires, interviews, observations, and a collection of paper and pencil stories and computer work. The results of this study indicated that writing-prompt software enabled two reluctant writers to think differently about their writing. Their computer experience changed their attitudes about writing and their style of writing. In addition, they took these experiences of writing with the computer and applied this knowledge to their everyday writing. Implications for teaching practices and future research are discussed.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Some children have difficulty getting started with their writing. Often they do not have a topic, can not find a way to begin their piece, or simply dislike writing. Whatever the case may be, these reluctant writers need help to "jump start" their writing process in order to get words on paper. Their procrastination or delaying efforts could be the result of having poor attitudes about writing or lacking the confidence to write a 'good' story. They may also lack the background knowledge on their topics to produce enough details in their writing. Consequently, educators search for interesting activities to implement in the classroom that will motivate reluctant writers to write.

Students who do not view writing as a positive experience are often those who are weak in writing and who have not had much success producing work in written form. These students may have difficulty putting words or phrases into complete sentences. They may not be familiar with the elements of a story and therefore can not structure their thoughts appropriately. Their attitudes, values and beliefs play a significant role in their literacy learning. Individuals who hold positive perceptions of themselves as writers will probably welcome opportunities to write, expend more effort during writing engagements, and demonstrate greater persistence in seeking writing competence (Bottomley, 1998). If children do not bring these components to their writing tasks, they will often meet failure.

Research has shown that when teachers allow students to choose their own topics for writing, they take control over their writing and are more motivated to write. Calkins (1986) and Graves (1983) suggest that students need to establish ownership of their topic in order to write well. Educators can facilitate this by allowing students to build on their background

knowledge of the topic. Building background knowledge is a critical step in creating well written material. When students write about something that is meaningful to them and relative to their life, writing can become a positive and successful experience for them. Educators constantly use pre-writing techniques to create an inviting environment that can help students experience writing in a different light. A common strategy that helps reluctant writers is the use of story starters. Teachers provide students with the beginning of a story and then allow them to write the rest of the story. Writing prompts enable students to use a given idea and expand on it rather than struggle with developing one on their own.

Technology plays a vital role in motivating students to write. Research indicated that basic word processing motivates reluctant writers, replaces illegible handwriting with clear print, and stimulates students to write and revise more (Kahn, 1988). More powerful software is now available. Software companies have created writing-prompt software packages that engage young writers in the writing process by providing an environment that stimulates ideas. Many packages guide children by offering tips on how to develop ideas, how to start their drafts, and how to solve problems that they encounter along the way. Most writing software packages support the learning environment by providing process writing activities—pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. These programs integrate sound, animation and humor to maintain children's interest and encourage them to express themselves through writing.

Selecting a topic, collecting details, and completing other preparatory activities can be difficult for some children. With a writing-prompt program, children explore different areas where they find writing ideas, projects and interesting facts about each topic. This can help children build on their background knowledge before the writing process begins. The ideas and facts are designed to encourage children to use their own experiences as a basis for their writing.

Question

This year-long study was designed to investigate what happens when reluctant writers use writing-prompt software. One question this study addresses is the following: Are the writing prompts helpful or do they hinder the child's writing? I was interested to learn if the writing prompts enabled students to generate new ideas on their own. I questioned if the program was too advanced for students and offered many unfamiliar topics or ideas, prohibiting them to write about something they knew well. Did the program provide students with background knowledge that would yield a longer piece of writing? Another question was whether students are motivated to write more once they use the writing prompt? I thought I might find that students were driven to write because of the pictures, animated objects, or the art studio. I thought I might learn that students were willing to work

independently and write stories on the computer without their teacher's assistance. I questioned whether students would be more willing to write using paper and pencil than they were prior to writing on a computer. Another area of interest was what happened to students' style of writing and attitude about writing? I was interested to learn what happened when students were given a writing prompt and asked to write with paper and pencil. Were they more confident and happy about their writing abilities and more willing to take risks? I paid close attention to their ability to brainstorm their topic using paper and pencil by looking at their prewriting list. Were they able to brainstorm and list many ideas on their own without relying on the computer's power to generate the ideas for them? I questioned how their proofreading skills would change. Would they continue to become frustrated with erasing mistakes and rewriting parts of their story or would they think differently about making corrections and additions to their work? I wondered whether they would take pride in their work because of its appearance both on the screen and printed out.

If research shows that the pre-writing strategies mentioned earlier are effective tools in getting children to write, and software companies claim that writing-prompt programs help reluctant writers, then what happens to a reluctant writer when both of these elements are combined?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is an important skill that most children will use throughout their lives. Reading programs generally focus on literature and writing. Often reading and writing are linked together in the curriculum. Research shows the importance of integrating holistic writing, so that it provides students with a "life-like" environment (Weaver, 1988). Writing can be a difficult skill to learn and as a result many children are reluctant to practice. Without practice, improvement is limited. It has been my experience that students learn more when they relate ideas and topics to their lives, and form relationships to learn more about their world.

A reluctant writer is a child who avoids writing, draws or doodles, and writes phrases to show writing is painful. Also, they may have poor handwriting. An at-risk writer may have low grades in spelling, or may be a reluctant reader with low self-esteem. Reluctant writers may show feelings of helplessness, complain about their cramped hands, or demonstrate pained silence when they write. Students who continually fail at tasks involving written expression often lose their motivation to engage in any writing activities (Calkins, 1986).

In a study that was conducted on motivating reluctant writers (Pierce, 1997), researchers found that the probable causes of non-writers are the problems they experience when they write. Problems relate to mechanics, spelling, handwriting, lack of motivation, lack of confidence, or fear of

making mistakes, because writing serves no function other than to document failure. A writing environment should be structured so that children's efforts produce positive reinforcement. The teacher's body language and verbal approval are essential in maintaining motivation in reluctant writers. Often reluctant writers associate the action of writing with their struggles with handwriting, spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Feedback to reluctant writers must be immediate as well as non-threatening. For many of these students their first writing attempts have been returned to them full of red notations and corrections for spelling, grammar, and incomplete sentences. Students' confidence levels increase when teachers accept what they have written and when students are encouraged to make choices and decisions about their writing. Repeated occurrences with unpleasant writing experiences lower their confidence levels and prevent them from taking risks in their writing. According to Graves (1983), students often compensate for their problems in writing through avoidance. Rather than risking failure, children simply give up on themselves and do not write.

Reading communication curriculum guides support the theory that students' interests expand through reading and writing about what they read, and frequent exposure to books leads to an appetite for more books and ideas (Lytle, 1990). Researchers suggest that teachers should give students a choice in selecting their reading and writing experiences in school, and assign and encourage self-selected reading and writing activities to be done at home. Children will be motivated to work when given a choice. The results are the same when children choose their own topic to write about; they will be more likely to complete an activity if the choice is theirs. Consequently, when children partake in these school tasks, they gain a feeling of ownership to the activity and put forth more effort in the final product.

When children tap into their background knowledge and get their thoughts on paper, they are able to realize what writing and print can do for them and how print can be organized. This realization lends itself to the purpose of writing, which is communication. Graves (1994) states that for many children, writing simply has no connection to everyday events. The most important thing teachers can do is help children understand why people write. Children are capable of learning this at an early age. They also are able to comprehend that writing helps them know what they are thinking about and that it has a purpose.

Writing process theorists (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1985) suggest that students should include incidents from their life that will interest them and motivate them to write. With well chosen topics children exercise strong control and establish ownership, and with this ownership comes pride in their writing.

There are educational books on the market that suggest playful ways to get children to write. Kaye (1995), claims that her book, Games for Writing, can reduce the difficulty of finding suitable topics and words, improve spelling, and beautify children's handwriting. Her book can also increase children's understanding of English grammar. Her rationale is that since children find pleasure in competitive games, these activities will put children in a mood of alertness and concentration where they will be eager to learn and not realize that they are writing.

Frank (1995), dedicates an entire chapter to writing problems and offers suggestions and strategies to use in the classroom that can help reluctant writers. When teachers encounter a child who is showing signs of boredom, disinterest, distraction, or stubbornness, Frank suggests that teachers try a different route to writing. The teacher may allow the child to spend more time on brainstorming the topic, give the child time off for that particular day, encourage other forms of expression, allow them to only write a short piece, or write together with the child. Her last suggestion is to send the child to the computer because kids write with less reluctance, more excitement, and greater success when they work at a keyboard.

Word processing is one of the most effective and widely used applications of computer technology (Richek, 1996). Students are fascinated with technology and are motivated to write longer compared to what they might complete with paper and pencil. Recent research finds that word processing motivates reluctant writers, replaces illegible handwriting with clear print, and stimulates students to write and revise more (Cochran-Smith, Paris & Kahn, 1991).

Word processing with computer prompting is most effective with poorer writers and least effective with better writers (Daiute, 1986). For remedial writers, writing prompts give them a start, an idea that they did not have to spend time thinking about. When advanced writers use writing prompts, it restricts their creativity and limits their quantity of writing that they could produce. They are not able to express themselves as freely as they would if the topic were self-selected. When the computer is used as an instrument for writing it can simplify the task that young children face as emergent writers. In a study conducted on students' perceptions and attitudes concerning computer usage of novice writers, researchers found that computer-assisted process writing appeared to be a promising learning and motivational tool for young writers (Repman, 1992). If this is true, then what can writing-prompt software do for reluctant writers?

Teachers and students view word processors as fun to use, challenging and rewarding. Researchers have found that when children use word processors their attitudes towards writing change. Students claim to enjoy producing written work more when they used a word processor, than with paper and pencil (Parr, 1992). Student anxiety is reduced because of the

ease of making changes. Revision steps aren't as overwhelming as they are on paper. Children do not have to worry about erasing, ripping the paper, and messing up the look of their creation. On the computer, children are able to easily edit their work by deleting mistakes and retyping their corrections. They only need to press keys. They do not need to manipulate a pencil for handwriting and be limited by their physical-motor development. Each letter that they type is standardized and easily read, unlike their earlier attempts at handwriting (Cochran- Smith, Paris & Kahn, 1991).

Word processors allow for experimentation and encourage writers to take greater risks (Marcus, 1983). Students feel they have control over their writing process. Morocco (1986) observed that when students wrote on the computer, they were willing to make more than one attempt to begin a piece of writing. They erased as they changed their minds or thought of additional ideas. When students' writing looks good, either on the screen or printed out, they take pride in their work. Rodrigues (1985) states that students become more independent and develop more confidence in themselves as writers when using a word processor. They are not as quick to request help with their writing.

Some of the physical constraints are alleviated when children use word processing programs (Daiute, 1983). When children need to revise their work, it often requires them to erase and rewrite. Word processors aid young writers or writers with special needs by removing the burden of rewriting text so they are able to focus on their thoughts as they write. Kahn (1988) suggests that we should not assume that every single writer likes word processing for all writing tasks or prefers it to paper and pencil. However, in a majority of cases teachers and students report that word processing is positively received by writers of all ages.

Many writing-prompt packages claim to help remedial readers and writers. The *Ultimate Writing & Creativity Center* claims to motivate children to write by providing an environment that stimulates ideas. There are writing prompts and story starters that can grab students' attention and motivate them to write. The program is designed to encourage young writers to accomplish writing tasks, to create their own graphics, and to dramatize their final work.

We know about the research and theory that supports how children learn to write, the characteristics of a reluctant writer, the environment needed that is conducive to writing, the motivating activities that educators can use, and the studies done on word processors and writing software. However, we do not know what happens when reluctant writers use writing prompt software. The tools and strategies that educators use to motivate children to write in the classroom are similar to the elements that make up a writing software package. Since research shows how powerful technology

can be for motivating children to write and how story starters can be helpful for reluctant writers. I am interested to learn what happens when both of these features are combined and used at the same time.

DESIGN

The sample consisted of two students from grade three. These two students were both age 8 at the beginning of the study. They attended a public school in a suburb outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The students in this school came from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

The selection of students for this research study was based on their writing interest and ability. Their writing background differed in the following way. Tony was on a third grade writing level and did not like to write. He earned minuses (needs for improvement) on his report card in the area of "Produces meaningful writing" and "Uses correct mechanics".

Chardae did not like to write either, and was writing on a second grade level. She received Title 1 services in second and third grade. She received minuses in the area of communications on her report card in first and second grade. Two writing levels were selected to explore whether Tony and Chardae's reactions to the software program were different.

Software

The students worked on a Compaq computer with *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center*, a writing-prompt software program from The Learning Company. The publisher claims that "this program will motivate children to write by providing an environment that stimulates ideas". It is designed to "engage children's interest and imagination while supporting all aspects of the writing process". The program has four main components: the Writing Idea Lands, the Word Processor, the Picture Place, and the Presentation Theater. The program has Penny, a helpful pen character, who guides children by offering tips on how to come up with ideas, starting their drafts, and solving problems that they encounter along the way. When children visit the writing lands they will find 1,000 writing ideas and projects, as well as interesting and unusual facts related to each land. When visiting the Rain Forest suggested writing topics would relate to the animals or plants in the rain forest. For example:

** Vanilla flavoring comes from the seed pods of vanilla orchids. What is your favorite flavoring? Write a menu of different foods that you like with that flavoring.

** See six creepy sleepy snakes slither sideways. Now write your own tongue twister about a boa.

There is a built-in speech component that allows children to hear what they have written and helps them identify areas for improvement.

Procedure

Both subjects in this study spent 1 hour a day after school twice a week for approximately four months, using *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center*. During the first two sessions the students familiarized themselves with the software. Then they explored the program, reading the story starters and ideas that the software program offered. It took 2-3 sessions for the children to become comfortable with the program and to be able to move around it quickly. Once they reached this comfort level, it took on average an entire session to choose a topic and complete the prewriting stage. The next session was spent writing rough drafts. We used the computer's tools to proofread, revise their writing and illustrate their work. It took the students approximately three sessions to write their story from start to finish. By the end of December each student had written three stories on the computer.

I assumed the role of the teacher and researcher in this study. I organized and taught the computer writing sessions and also analyzed the data. Teacher intervention was limited to observing the writing process and asking questions. I asked questions that would have students share what they were thinking, and explain what they were doing (see appendix for sample transcript). I also had students reread parts of their stories and provided help during the revision and illustrating stages.

Data Collection

Data were collected in the following ways: 1) recording observations of each student writing with word processing; 2) audiotaping our conversations and recording their behavior as they used the computer; 3) holding a pre-interview and final interview; 4) informal interviewing after each session; 5) collecting written work with the software program as well as pencil and paper.

Daily logs were kept and used for anecdotal comments on how the child reacted to the software. Notes on what was done during each session were also recorded in the log. Recordings of the sessions were made into transcripts that described the students' activities at the computer. These transcripts were later used for data analysis. I held a pre-interview with each student that included questions on how they felt about writing with paper and pencil, how they viewed themselves as writers, and how they begin to write a story. There were also computer-related questions to see what kind of prior experience, if any, they had using computers. Informal interviews were held after each session, which allowed the student to reflect

on their computer activities. Writing samples of weekly journal entries using paper and pencil were collected. Most of the entries began where the teacher gave a story starter and the students had to finish the story. After writing with the computer, children's written work using paper and pencil were gathered and analyzed. Students received a final interview to determine whether their feelings changed after using writing-prompt software to write stories. The computer printouts contained published copies of each story that the student wrote.

Method of Analysis

The transcripts that were created from the audio recordings were read and analyzed. I looked for response patterns in the following areas: the helpfulness of prompts, student motivation, and changes in style and attitude. By helpfulness of prompts I wondered: whether and how the writing prompts were helpful; whether they helped students generate ideas on their own; whether they overwhelmed students; and whether topics were too advanced or unfamiliar to them. On the issue of motivation I wondered if: students were motivated to write stories; students were fascinated with the pictures, animation, sound, and art studio; students were more willing to work independently; students preferred to write stories on the computer; and students were willing to write with paper and pencil after their computer experience. I thought it was possible that students' style of writing and attitude about writing would change. I wondered whether students would become more confident in their writing and be willing to take risks. Would they proofread differently? Did their ability and quality of writing improve? Would they begin to take pride in their work?

I used post-it notes, a different color for each area (finding) and marked the transcripts. Grouping student responses in this way allowed me to identify common themes and focus on the quantity of verbal response relating to each area.

The pre-interview and final interview questions and answers were analyzed as well. I compared their answers before and after they wrote their stories on the computer to see if there was a change in their attitude about writing and computers.

The amount of writing that students did in their journals using paper and pencil was compared to the amount of writing involved on their computer-written stories. I wanted to see if the students wrote more on the computer when they used the ideas from the program than when they used paper and pencil at their seats.

DATA ANALYSIS

This paper presents the following findings:

- Both children were motivated to write and preferred to write on the computer.

- Both children reported that writing with writing-prompt software was helpful in writing stories.
- Both children's style and attitude about writing changed after working on the computer.

These findings indicate that writing-prompt software can be a valuable tool for reluctant writers.

Past Research & Similar Findings

We have learned much from the past years of computer writing research. We know that students write longer texts with computers and their work has fewer errors. We know that students prefer to write with computers rather than paper and pencil and student attitudes towards computers are positive. In this study, I found the same results when both students wrote with computers. After each computer session informal interviews were held to learn what both students thought of their daily experiences. As the students spent more time writing with the computer, they repeatedly expressed how easy it was to write. After they each wrote their first story on the computer, I asked Tony and Chardae whether they preferred writing on the computer or writing with paper and pencil. Both expressed a preference for the computer. When I asked them why they chose the computer they told me that it looked neater and it was easier to write. In one of our conversations Chardae explained why she preferred the computer program to writing stories with paper and pencil. Her explanation included reactions and remarks similar to Tony's. She shared, "If you write with paper and spell something wrong, you need to erase it and your paper won't look right. You won't be able to see the letters that well on paper." It was interesting to learn that Chardae preferred writing with computers because of the appearance of her writing- neat with word processing, sloppy with pencil and paper. Tony's answers clearly illustrated his preference for computers. Tony focused on the ability to proofread his work quickly and easily. These findings are in accordance with other research about children writing with word processing (Cochran-Smith, Paris & Kahn, 1991).

When I asked Tony and Chardae how the program's writing prompts helped them write their stories, both said the program contained many topics to choose from, which allowed them to select the ones they especially liked. Earlier in this study I interviewed both students to find out how they felt about story starters and choosing their own topic to write about. The interviews revealed that both students like story starters, but prefer to choose their own topic. Chardae recalled, "I usually choose my own topic. I like that better because I know what I want to write about. If I didn't choose it, I may not know what to write about." Chardae made a reference to her story entitled "Being Alone" and said, "I chose to write about being alone because it was an easy topic and not hard to understand. There are a lot of

things to do when you are alone." Tony admitted that he chose to write about babysitting the humpback whale because he had to baby sit before and he knew the kinds of things that babies need. It is evident that both children chose topics that they liked, that were familiar to them, and about which they had some knowledge. These results were not surprising. Past research has shown how children will write more if choice is an option. Therefore, I expected Tony and Chardae to enjoy having the freedom to choose their own topic.

Another observation made regarding how helpful the writing program was to both students, was the student's ability to write longer stories on the computer than on paper and pencil. When children choose their own topic and gain additional background knowledge and ideas from a writing program, it is likely that their stories will contain many details and be longer in length. I was able to observe just that. Both students credited the length of their stories to being able to choose their own topic. Chardae mentioned the story she wrote on being alone and how easy it was to write a lot. She stated, "I came up with more ideas because I already know what I do when I am alone."

In the interviews that were conducted in the beginning of this study both students declared that they were writers and liked to write a little. When I compared their paper and pencil stories to their computer-written stories, it was clear how much more thought and work went into their computer-written writing. Two months prior to Chardae's computer experience, she produced the following paper and pencil story in her journal.

Weekend

Last weekend I watched TV and went to the mall and bought two Gigapets and I also got new boots and new shoes and a new dress.

It is clear that Chardae's ideas were limited and she neglected to proofread her work. When I showed her this journal entry, she laughed and seemed embarrassed. She is now more likely to reread and revise her work than she would have before working on the computer.

We compared this journal entry with Chardae's computer written story entitled Being Alone that she finished in December (2 months later). Her completed story looked like this:

Being Alone

When I am alone I do many things. I like to play with toys and animals like bears and pigs. When I am alone I can listen to music. My favorite group is The Backstreet Boys. When I am alone I can read a lot of books like Piggie Pie, Titanic, and Doctor Dan.

When I am in my basement I play with my toys. I make my toy rabbit walk. I can color in my coloring book and rip out my favorite page. I like to count my money at home and put it in my wallet. Then I give it to my grandmom. She puts it in her pocketbook to hold for me.

I also like to look at the clock and see what time it is. I enjoy saying the correct time to myself.

These are the things I like to do when I am alone. I enjoy being by myself.

I wanted to know why Chardae did not write as much about her weekend (a familiar topic) in her journal. She explained that, "Every Monday my homeroom teacher assigns that story starter. I get tired of writing about that." I went on and questioned why she felt her computer story was longer and she explained that she wanted to write about being alone and the computer helped her. I asked her how it helped her and she responded, " I could pick a story and no one made me write about something I don't know about." We can attribute Chardae's story length to her ability to choose what she wants to write about and the software program's power to generate additional ideas for her. Interestingly enough the teacher's story starter was not helpful because Chardae did not choose that starter and she was bored with writing about her weekends.

Both students' responses indicate that computers are powerful tools that can make writing seem painless and have the potential to help reluctant writers by inviting them into a game-like situation, a situation in which children today are very eager to participate. Thus, children are willing to write and are eager to write more because the process seems effortless (Kahn, 1988). Newman (1983) seemed to echo the point about writers feeling satisfied because they are able to edit easily and produce clean printed copies of their writing. When teachers present material to children in a game-like fashion, children are likely to become more interested and motivated to learn. The concept for computers is the same. What motivated these two children to write was a combination of the program's "game-like" appearance, its many appealing features, the ease of writing, and the appearance of the final product.

The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center

Technology has the power to stimulate ideas by integrating sound, animation and humor, and thus invite children into a world of writing. Prior to the start of this study, Chardae's experience with computers was limited. Tony did not have any computer experience before this study began. I asked both students what they liked about computers. Chardae responded, "that you can play games" and Tony liked how you can hit numbers, how easy it was to write and how nice the stories came out. Both students felt one of the difficult parts about the writing process was proofreading their own work. They shared their sense that they never knew where their mistakes were or

how to correct their sentences. This seems to be a common finding for many elementary students, not just with these two reluctant writers. Both students enjoyed visiting the theater, where they heard the computer read their stories aloud. They were able to hear their mistakes and easily locate them during the revision stage.

In the following conversation, Tony explained why he preferred writing on the computer.

> **Teacher:** If I asked you to go back and make corrections in your story, what would you think?
> **Student:** It would be easy.
> **Teacher:** What would make it easy?
> **Student:** I just look at it and know there was a mistake.
> **Teacher:** Why else would it be easy to proofread?
> **Student:** I can go to that 'reading thing' (theater) and have the computer read my story. Then I will hear where my mistakes are. Then I just go to that part and add words.
> **Teacher**: What do you mean 'just add words"?
> **Student:** I would just know what I had to correct by listening to the computer.
>
> **Teacher:** How do you feel when you have to make corrections on paper?
> **Student:** Bored because I wouldn't want to do it. I do like to write but I just can't make sentences. I would make one sentence without a period and it would sound too long.
> **Teacher:** Like a run-on sentence?
> **Student:** Yes and the teacher would make me correct it and it would be like writing it over and over again. It would feel like I was doing the same thing.
> **Teacher:** Would you have to rewrite the whole thing over on the computer?
> **Student:** No, when the computer voice reads my story I will know that my sentences don't make sense and then I can go and fix it.

Tony has clearly expressed a preference for writing with computers because the software program reads the story aloud and assists writers in editing their work. Many reluctant writers dislike proofreading their work because they can not identify their mistakes and do not know how to spell each word correctly.

Another common concern of teachers is getting children to supply details in their stories. Both students' pencil and paper stories were short and lacked the attention needed to create a rich piece of work. Complaints of "I don't know what to write about" are often heard from students who dislike writing. They are the same comments I heard from Tony and Chardae when they wrote prior to this study.

The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center's animated objects, sound and pictures helped these two students generate more ideas than they would

with paper and pencil. Since this writing–prompt software program provides over 1,000 topics to write about, it was not difficult for two reluctant writers to find topics that would generate many ideas to add to their stories. In the following conversation Tony explained why the program was helpful to him by comparing his experiences to writing with paper and pencil. I have quoted this conversation verbatim, because it includes an explanation of how writing-prompt software helps reluctant writers who have difficulty generating ideas.

> **Teacher:** Look at this story you wrote with paper and pencil. Did you come up with more ideas here or on the computer?
> **Tony:** On the computer.
> **Teacher:** Why on the computer?
> **Tony:** It showed me stuff that I could write about and if you pressed these animals or objects, they would talk and tell you what they did. But you can't press anything on paper so you have to think really hard about what you want to write about. This (pointing to computer) gives you answers. You can press on something and they talk. You can see what you want to write about. You have to really think a lot with paper and pencil.

Chardae shared Tony's attitude about the program's ability to generate ideas. She especially liked clicking on different things and learning about them. Chardae felt they gave her ideas and made her think, "Gee I know what else can go with that."

As a researcher and elementary school teacher, I questioned whether writing-prompt software would help students who had a difficult time developing a topic. Often the problem seems to be that the child lacks the background knowledge needed to produce good stories. Therefore, I wondered if the software programs could provide students with additional information that they could add to their own background knowledge and use in their writing. In fact this turned out to be the case for both students in this study. The software program provided students with pictures, facts, and short descriptions of the places, objects, and animals in each idea land. These prompts either sparked a new thought, expanded their thinking, or provided them with more ideas to add to their writing. When I asked the children if the program was helpful, both students responded that it gave them things to write about that they had forgotten. When I asked them what they meant by that, they explained that the program helped them come up with ideas by showing them things on the screen and allowing them to click on objects to get more information. Tony shared, "The program helped me write because it showed me a whale jumping out of the water and told me a short story about whales. I got more ideas when I saw the whale and remembered what the whale did and said." When I asked Chardae again what made the program helpful, she specifically recalled, "When I chose to

write about a jelly fish I went here and clicked this and it told me about the jelly fish. It said things like what they eat and how long it can stay out of water." She also stated that she looked at the jellyfish on the screen and more ideas came into her mind.

It has been my experience that when children write they pull from their background knowledge first and add additional information that they have acquired. I remember Tony's first story was about space. I reminded him to go back to the space screen and decide if there were any ideas he wanted to add in his story. When I asked him how he came up with those additional ideas he remarked, "The computer helped me because it showed me a screen that might be in space. The space screen helped me add more to my writing." I noticed Tony's ability to develop a long list of words in his second story, and asked him what specifically helped him write his story. He commented, "The whale came and jumped out of the water. They were singing and the scenery gave me ideas too."

Change in Attitude and Style

So far I have discussed the ways in which *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center* was helpful for two reluctant writers. I will show how writing-prompt software changed the way Chardae and Tony felt about writing. This software program enabled two students to become more confident in their writing because they had control over their writing. Their self-esteem was affected by their experiences with the software program. Surprisingly this change was not limited to writing at the computer but carried over to their pencil and paper writing. I will illustrate how they applied what they learned as a result of using *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center* to their daily writing.

I had the opportunity to have Chardae in my reading class where I was able to witness her pencil-and-paper writing progress after her computer experience. She now takes her time on all writing assignments including journal entries, question and answer completions, and paragraph writing. She creates longer lists of words in the pre-writing stage and includes more details in her stories, which leads to longer pieces of writing. This confidence boost made her happy to write. I have included a story that she wrote with paper and pencil one week after our last computer session. She wrote about meeting a snowman and the places that she would take the snowman.

Me and My Snowman

One day me and my snowman went to many places. The first place we went to was the woods where there were a lot of trees. We saw a big bear in the woods and a lot of leaves. There was a big bad wolf behind the bush.

> The next place that I took him was to the zoo. We went to see the big, big black cat. We saw a big snake in the zoo. There were a lot of people walking around looking at the animals.
>
> Then I took my friend to school. We told the time on the clock on the wall. We learned about all kinds of numbers in Math class. We looked at a lot of books in my reading class. We took a cool test. My teacher taught us our ABCs.
>
> My trip with my snowman friend was fun. He saw things that he never saw before.

We can see that she has written 16 sentences. This is more than she wrote with pencil and paper before working on the computer. After she finished writing her snowman story I asked if she always wrote stories this long and with as much detail. She said, "No because on the computer I added more ideas before I wrote and it made a nice story. I remembered that a story needs a lot of details so I got excited about thinking of more things that my snowman and I could do." I asked Chardae how she felt about her pencil and paper stories now and she smiled shyly and answered, "Pretty good." She commented that she couldn't wait for me to call on her in reading class to read her story to her friends. She also felt now that she was writing nicely and would be called on to walk around and help others add more to their writing.

Both Chardae and Tony assert that they are better writers after writing on the computer. They have reported that the computer helped them spell words and correct their words. Chardae shared, "I didn't feel like I wanted to cry when Penny (the writing helper in the theater) helped me correct my story. I used to feel bad and stupid when I made mistakes. But the computer didn't make me feel that way." Her statement reveals that she doesn't fear making mistakes in her writing. She now has confidence in her ability to write that didn't exist prior to working with *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center.*

It has been my experience that when children are confident about what they are doing and are in control of their learning, they are more likely to take risks. That is what occurred in this study. Chardae and Tony both had control of their writing by choosing their own topic, manipulating the program as they needed, proofreading their work with the support of the program, and designing their final products. The more stories they wrote, the more confident they became. This confidence building positively affected their self-esteem, which altered the way they perceived themselves as writers. Here are collections of comments on how writing with this software program affected their self-esteem. In all these quotes, and many others, the students told me that they feel different about writing.

I used to get mad if I made a mistake and ripped my paper. But now I don't get as mad. Now I try my best. --Chardae

I feel pretty good about my stories. I feel good that I can write and get a print-out and read it to the class. That is cool and it helps me if I want to be a writer. I know what I have to do now to write a story. I can help others in the class. –Chardae

When the computer voice reads my story I will know that my sentences don't make sense and then I can go and fix it. –Tony

I get excited about gluing my story to construction paper and hanging it in the room. Then I can read it to the class. –Tony

Their enthusiastic responses and the tone of their voice was enough to believe that writing with *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center* gave them an opportunity not only to improve their writing ability but also to build their confidence and self-esteem.

Throughout the computer sessions I wondered whether the students' changes in writing would only be practiced in a computer program environment or if they would apply these changes to any writing situation. Prior to this study, Tony and Chardae both expressed a difficulty during the pre-writing and the rough draft stages. Since having their computer experiences, their feelings have changed. They are aware of what they need to do in order to write well and what happens when they include many ideas in their writing. Tony felt that the program taught him how to write a good story and to think before he writes. When I asked him how the program did that for him, he answered, "The computer gave me pictures and showed me what I could write about. So now when I write I know I have to think about a lot of ideas"

I have included a story that Tony wrote prior to his computer sessions to illustrate the extent of the improvement in his writing. He preferred to choose his own topic rather than use a story starter and decided to write about Halloween. His story looked like this:

Halloween

I like Halloween because you get a lot of candy. When people come to your door you can scare them on your porch.

It is obvious that Tony's ability to add details to his writing was weak. He struggled to complete this piece in 20 minutes. Approximately one month later, Tony wrote a story on the computer with *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center*. He chose to search the ocean (Idea Land) because he likes the animals in the ocean. He took a strong liking to the whale and the

animation and sound that occurred when he clicked on the objects on the screen. That seemed to fascinate him enough to write about a baby humpback whale. His story looked like this when he was finished:

A Hard Responsibility

This is how you take care of a humpback whale. A baby humpback whale needs a toy to play with so it doesn't cry. It takes responsibility and you need something to keep him busy. It needs a bath to stay alive. I would bring his friends to my house to see him. I could put him in his waterbed. He would bounce up and down. I could put him on his swing. He would be very fast. Then I would bring him inside to play with his toys. We would have a blast. I could go into the kitchen and get him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He would be hard to take care of, but I would have fun.

This story reveals a capable writer who knew what he had to do in order to start the writing process. The program provided a familiar topic that enabled Tony to supply his own ideas from personal experiences. One concern at the beginning of this study was that the program might provide too much help and structure. But this did not happen. The content of his story was not entirely derived from the program. The program did not dictate his story. Tony thought about the topic and included his own content. He did not rely on the software program to generate all of his ideas. Thus, he was able to take what he learned from his computer experiences and apply it to his writing. Tony was also eager to make revisions with the computer's help.

Not only did Tony improve his writing on the computer, but also with pencil and paper. Moxley (1992) uncovered the same results for children using word processing. The parents of the children in that study commented on their children's interest in writing. Their writing skills improved and they wrote longer stories after using the computer. Four months after Tony's first computer session he completed the following story. Once again he chose a topic, brainstormed it and added details in his writing. His work illustrates that he processed his ideas into nicely written sentences.

My Dream

My Dream is to become an artist because I can draw Pokemon. I would make a stand and draw pictures of people in the chair. I could draw a picture of Muhammad Ali. I would draw a dragon fighting a knight over an endless pit. The dragon would almost fall in, but he would fly out of the bottomless pit. When I die everyone will remember my pictures.

When I asked Tony what he thought about his story he replied, "Good. I took my time and thought about the topic. When I wrote that story it showed what I can do, not what the computer can do. I am writing slow and

my handwriting is turning out nicer than before." I asked him why he takes his time now with paper and pencil, as he did not before his computer experiences. He explained that it was because of the computer. He liked the way his writing looked on the computer and wanted his work to look as neat. He still prefers the computer because his stories look good and it gives him ideas to write about.

As mentioned earlier, Chardae is in my reading class and I am able to watch her writing progress. Her entire attitude about writing has changed. I feel a contributing factor to her improvement was the confidence she gained when she found success in writing. Mrs. Brown, Chardae's social studies and science teacher has also seen an improvement in her willingness to write. She feels this is a result of working on the computer. Mrs. Brown shared, "After several computer sessions Chardae became more confident in her writing. She answers questions in complete sentences and is eager to share her answers with the class."

Mrs. Brown has Tony for reading and feels that he too has progressed. She explained, "Tony has shown some improvement in his writing. However, he is still a bit reluctant to write. It takes him awhile to brainstorm a topic and complete the rough draft." During the interview with Mrs. Brown, I found out that she usually gives her students a topic or story starter to write about. This may be the reason he is still reluctant to write. Tony has already stated earlier in this study a preference for choosing his own topic. We have seen the results of his writing when choice was an option. I believe both Tony and Chardae have taken these writing changes and adapted them to most writing environments. I fear that if Tony is not permitted to choose his own topics, then these changes will not be applied to his daily writing. They will only be demonstrated in a computer environment.

I have shown that children said that *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center*, a writing-prompt software program helped them become better writers and identified the ways in which the program assisted them. Both students were motivated to write with the computer because the program was 'game-like', their stories looked clean and neat on the screen and printed out, and the program made it easy for them to proofread their work. Moreover, Tony and Chardae explained that they wrote more because they could choose their own topic and take new additional information from the program to include in their work. The reading teacher and I have witnessed their attitudes about writing and their approach to writing change since their experiences with the computer. They were able to take what they learned from their computer experiences and apply it to any writing situation. This study shows that writing-prompt software, such as *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center* can help reluctant writers think differently about their writing and become better writers.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study demonstrated the effectiveness of *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center*, a writing-prompt software program that promotes writing development. The primary emphasis of the study was to illustrate how helpful this software was for two reluctant writers. Both children reported that computers were fun, made writing easy and painless, and allowed them to write more as evidenced by their verbal responses included in the data analysis. This study has also clearly shown that *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center* is a promising learning and motivational tool for reluctant writers. Both children preferred using the program to writing with paper and pencil. We know this because they frequently asked to stay in during recess. Moreover, they maintained their enthusiasm for writing on the computer months later.

Students began to take their writing seriously. Instead of focusing on the appearance of their work, they were able to concentrate on the message they intended to communicate. This echoes the findings of Kahn (1988) who describes similar changes in children's writing in second grade. But this software provided more than just ease of production. *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center* provided these reluctant writers with an interactive and easy-navigating writing program. It contained 1,000 different topics to choose from which enticed and changed their attitude and style of writing. The two students in this study had control of their writing as they explored the program and easily followed the writing process. This instilled a sense of accomplishment and increased their self-esteem. Consequently, they generated a willingness to write more with paper and pencil, and their writing habits improved.

It has been my experience that technology has changed the learning experiences of students and that technology integration is becoming a common practice among educators. Students are learning to organize their thinking, revise their work, collaborate on projects with others, and present knowledge to audiences (Cochran-Paris, Smith & Kahn, 1991). This study identifies the value of one use of technology in the classroom for young reluctant writers.

Decisions need to be made on how to incorporate technology into the classroom. Some administrators and teachers are hesitant about fully implementing technology into the curriculum. For schools to take advantage of technology, teachers must have more time and opportunities to learn about and become comfortable with computers. The availability of computers in the classroom would enable teachers to identify educationally valuable uses of technology for students and also for themselves. This research suggests one such use and demonstrates for teachers and administrators the possibilities for integration of technology.

The findings in this study that students wrote more using the computer and were willing to compose stories on the computer, were common

results found in word processing studies (Cochran-Smith, Paris, & Kahn, 1991). The additional findings of my study were that students learned the importance of details in writing and applied this knowledge, whether they wrote with or without the software program. Their confidence and their abilities to write grew and both students viewed themselves as better writers. This can be extremely beneficial to teachers of reluctant writers. If teachers believe that using technology helps students learn to appreciate writing, then they may want to consider implementing writing-prompt software in their reading curriculum. The results of this study show what can occur when two reluctant writers use one specific writing program. Even though one software program was utilized throughout this study, the possibility exists that other writing-prompt software similar to *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center*, may be as helpful and effective in improving students' writing abilities. This may imply that teachers need to become involved in the preview, selection and purchases of software. They may also need to be willing to learn to evaluate software for its purposes and objectives.

Some form of written expression is practiced in almost every academic area and is often a struggle for children. Districts look for ways to improve the learning process and build academic scores. Therefore, the financial investment of purchasing more computers may be of worthy consideration. *The Ultimate Writing and Creativity Center* was useful in getting reluctant writers to enjoy writing. This study was conducted in a classroom with only one computer. In a classroom with more than one computer more children could write simultaneously. This may mean that teachers seek information on getting classrooms networked so that many students can use the software program at the same time. In addition, the need for computer labs may surface as a result of this research.

This research project was to investigate what happened when two reluctant writers used writing-prompt software. Each study session took place after school in a classroom with one computer. Therefore, it is expected that these results would stimulate further research focused on questions such as: Would the results differ if the study focused on a larger population of writers networked to the same software program? Would the quality of writing vary if students were asked to write during school hours and with a different piece of writing software? What happens when children write together?

In the past we have learned much from word processing research. We know that students write longer texts with computers and are more likely to revise their writing. They prefer writing with computers to writing with pencil and paper because it is easier and physically painless. This research project has provided an illustration of the value of writing prompt software for reluctant writers. We know that writing-prompt software helped these reluctant writers change the way they viewed writing, become better writers by applying their acquired knowledge and view themselves as better writers.

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